The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock Study Guide

The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock by T. S. Eliot

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Introduction

Segments of "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," often called "the first Modernist poem," appeared in the *Harvard Advocate* in 1906 while Eliot was an undergraduate. He later read the poem to Ezra Pound in England and Pound arranged to have it published in the prestigious American journal *Poetry* in June 1915. It was included in *Prufrock and Other Observations,* Eliot's first book of poetry, in 1917.

Eliot's interest in music is made evident in the title, but the term "love song" is used loosely here. The poem centers on the feelings and thoughts of the persona, J. Alfred Prufrock, as he walks to meet a woman for tea and considers a question he feels compelled to ask her (something along the lines of "Will you marry me?"). In fact, in this poem he never arrives at tea, let alone sings to the woman. The poem is composed of Prufrock's own neurotic-if lyrical-associations. Indeed, over the course of the poem, he sets up analogies between himself and various familiar cultural figures, among them Hamlet. This establishes a connection with Hamlet's famous soliloquy ("To be or not to be? That is the question"). Prufrock's doubt that he deserves the answer he desires from this woman transforms the poem into a kind of interior monologue or soliloquy in which "To be or not to be?" is for Prufrock "To be what?" and "What or who am I to ask this woman to marry me?"

Author Biography

Eliot was born in 1888 in St. Louis, Missouri, a member of a distinguished family that included Puritan ancestors who had been original settlers of Massachusetts. In 1906 Eliot entered Harvard University. He served on the staff of the *Harvard Advocate,* the university's literary journal, in which he first published parts of 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." He completed his undergraduate studies in 1909 and his master's degree in English literature the following year. Over the next six years Eliot pursued graduate studies in philosophy at the Sorbonne, Harvard, Marburg, and Oxford, completing his dissertation in 1916. During this time Eliot met Ezra Pound, who became his lifelong friend and an important literary influence. In 1915, while studying in England, Eliot met and later married an Englishwoman named Vivien Haigh-Wood. Their marriage has generally been characterized as unhappy, troubled by Vivien's neurotic illnesses and Eliot's sexual apprehensions. The couple settled in London, and Eliot began teaching at a boy's school while writing reviews for various periodicals and composing poetry. In 1917 Eliot left teaching and began working at Lloyd's Bank; however, he continued to follow his literary pursuits, publishing *Prufrock and Other Observations* in 1917 and becoming an assistant editor for the journal the *Egoist.* The combined strain of his failing marriage and the pressures from his banking and writing careers resulted in Eliot's emotional breakdown in 1921. He sought treatment at a sanatorium in Switzerland, where he completed *The Waste Land* in 1922. Returning to London, Eliot became the founding editor of a new literary journal, the *Criterion,* in which he published *The Waste Land.* The *Criterion* is now recognized as one of the most distinguished periodicals in the twentieth century.

After having lived in England for over a decade, in 1927 Eliot became a British subject and a member of the Anglican Church. Five years later, he received a one-year appointment to the Charles seen as simply the romantic agonizing of a young man (Eliot was eighteen when he began the poem) over a woman he loves, "The Love Song of Eliot *Norton* professorship at Harvard and subsequently lectured at major universities throughout the United States. Also during the 1930s Eliot began devoting much of his time to writing verse dramas. During World War II Eliot wrote his last major poetic works, *East Coker* (1940), *Burnt Norton* (1941), *The Dry Salvages* (1941), and *Little Gidding* (1942, together published as *Four Quartets).* Eliot experienced marked changes in his personal life beginning in 1947, when Vivien died after having spent several years in an institution. He subsequently met Valerie Fletcher, who became his secretary and later his wife, and with whom he enjoyed a stable and happy relationship *for* the rest of his life. In 1948 Eliot received both the Nobel Prize *for* Literature and the Order of Merit by George VI, both honors-along with his newfound popularity as a dramatist-augmenting his stature as a celebrated literary figure which he maintained until his death in 1965. Eliot is buried in Poet's Comer of Westminster Abbey.

Poem Text

S'io *credesse che mia risposta fosse*
A persona che mai tomasse at mondo,
Questa fiamma staria senza piu scosse.
Ma perciocche giammai di questo Jondo
Non torno vivo alcun, s'i'odo if vera,
Senza tema d'inJamia ti rispondo.
Let us go then, you and I,
When the evening is spread out against the sky
Like a patient etherised upon a table;
Let us go, through certain half-deserted streets,
The muttering retreats
Of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels
And sawdust restaurants with oyster-shells:
Streets that follow like a tedious argument
Of insidious intent
To lead you to an overwhelming question...
Oh, do not ask, "What is it?"
Let us go and make our visit.
In the room the women come and go
Talking of Michelangelo.
The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the
window-panes.
The yellow smoke that rubs its muzzle on the
window-paqes
Licked its tongue into the comers of the evening,
Lingered upon the pools that stand in drains,
Let fall upon its back the soot that falls from
chimneys,
Slipped by the terrace, made a sudden leap,
And seeing that it was a soft October night,
Curled once about the house, and fell asleep.
And indeed there will be time
For the yellow smoke that slides along the street,
Rubbing its back upon the window-panes;
There will be time, there will be time
To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet;
There will be time to murder and create,
And time for all the works and days of hands
That lift and drop a question on your plate;
Time for you and time for me,
And time yet for a hundred indecisions,
And for a hundred visions and revisions,
Before the taking of a toast and tea.

In the room the women come and go
Talking of Michelangelo.
And indeed there will be time
To wonder, "Do I dare?" and, "Do I dare?"
Time to turn back and descend the stair,
With a bald spot in the middle of my hair
[They will say: "How his hair is growing thin!"]
My morning coat, my collar mounting firmly to the chin,
My necktie rich and modest, but asserted by a simple pin
[They will say: "But how his arms and legs are thin!"]
Do I dare
Disturb the universe?
In a minute there is time
For decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse.
For I have known them all already, known them all:
Have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons,
I have measured out my life with coffee spoons;
I know the voices dying with a dying fall
Beneath the music from a farther room.
So how should I presume?
And I have known the eyes already, known them all
The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase,
And when I am formulated, sprawling on a pin,
When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall,
Then how should I begin
To spit out all the butt-ends of my days and ways?
And how should I presume?
And I have known the arms already, known them all Arms that are braceleted and white and bare
[But in the lamplight, downed with light brown hair!]
Is it perfume from a dress
That makes me so digress?
Arms that lie along a table, or wrap about a shawl.
And should I then presume?
And how should I begin?
Shall I say, I have gone at dusk through narrow streets And watched the smoke that rises from the pipes
Of lonely men in shirt-sleeves, leaning out of windows? ...

I should have been a pair of ragged claws
Scuttling across the floors of silent seas.
And the afternoon, the evening, sleeps so
peacefully!
Smoothed by long fingers,
Asleep... tired... or it malingers,
Stretched on the floor, here beside you and me.
Should I, after tea and cakes and ices,
Have the strength to force the moment to its crisis?
But though I have wept and fasted, wept and
prayed,
Though I have seen my head [grown slightly bald]
brought in upon a platter,
[am no prophet-and here's no great matter;
[have seen the moment of my greatness flicker,
And I have seen the eternal Footman hold my coat,
and snicker,
And in short, I was afraid.
And would it have been worth it, after all,
After the cups, the marmalade, the tea,
Among the porcelain, among some talk of you and
me,
Would it have been worth while,
To have bitten off the matter with a smile,
To have squeezed the universe into a ball
To roll it toward some overwhelming question,
To say: "I am Lazarus, come from the dead,
Come back to tell you all, I shall tell you all"
If one, settling a pillow by her head,
Should say: "That is not what I meant at all.
That is not it, at all."
And would it have been worth it, after all,
Would it have been worth while,
After the sunsets and the dooryards and the
sprinkled streets,
After the novels, after the teacups, after the skirts
that trail along the
tloor
And this, and so much more')
It is impossible to say just what I mean'
But as if a magic lantern threw the nerves in
patterns on a screen:
Would it have been worth while
If one, settling a pillow or throwing off a shawl,
And turning toward the window, should say:
'That is not it at all,

That is not what I meant, at all."
No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be;
Am an attendant lord, one that will do
To swell a progress, start a scene or two,
Advise the prince; no doubt, an easy tool,
Deferential, glad to be of use,
Politic, cautious, and meticulous;
Full of high sentence, but a bit obtuse;
At times, indeed, almost ridiculous
Almost, at times, the Fool.
I grow old ... I grow old ...
I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled.
Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare to eat a
peach?
I shall wear white flannel trousers, and walk upon
the beach.
I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each.
I do not think that they will sing to me.
I have seen them riding seaward on the waves
Combing the white hair of the waves blown back
When the wind blows the water white and black.
We have lingered in the chambers of the sea
By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown
Till human voices wake us, and we drown.

Plot Summary

Lines 1-6:

This epigraph is taken from Dante's Divine Comedy. It reads: "If I thought my answer were to one who could ever return to the world, this flame would move no more; but since no one has ever returned alive from this depth, if what I hear be true, without fear of infamy I answer you." The words are spoken by a lost soul, damned to Hell for the attempt to buy absolution in advance of committing a crime. This correlates with Prufrock's need to know the answer to the question he wants to ask as a condition of asking it. Or perhaps in order for Prufrock to be able to ask the question he would have to not care what the answer would be; in that case, the answer wouldn't matter.

Lines 7-9:

Prufrock, the persona of the poem, issues his invitation to an unspecified "you" to go with him to an as yet unspecified place. To establish when they will be going, he introduces the disconcerting simile "like a patient etherised upon a table." This peculiar use of simile reflects immediately back on the persona, for the sky itself would probably never be *like* this; however, Prufrock, looking up at the sky, might indeed perceive it pressing back down upon him in such a way that he would feel like he was "spread out" "upon a table." The word "etherised" indicates a sense of helplessness.

Lines 10-13:

The route he and the "you" will be taking is through a tawdry part of the city where "cheap hotels" predominate, along with lower-class dining establishments. "Muttering retreats" suggests places where people who go to be alone speak in low voices so their private conversations will not be heard. The phrase "one-night" refers to hotels where lovers meet in secret, and the reference to "oyster-shells" carries with it the connotation of sexuality, as these are a food said to improve sexual stamina.

Lines 14-18:

"Streets" are further described by a simile that indicates that even once you pass through them, the things you have seen there continue to affect you, specifically the idea of people engaged in the romantic or sexual encounters in the hotels and restaurants. This then affects Prufrock's thoughts about where he is going, causing him to consider what he characterizes as an "overwhelming" question. The use of the ellipsis indicates that the "you" who accompanies Prufrock has asked what that question would be.

The rhymed couplets of "I-sky," "streets-retreats," "hotels-oyster-shells," "argument-intent," and "'What is it?' -visit," along with repetition of the word "streets," create an emotional music in keeping with the idea of a song, and thus serve to carry the reader into Prufrock's emotional state.

Lines 19-20:

The reference to the visit presented in the preceding stanza causes Prufrock to look forward in his mind's eye to the room he is walking toward, where he imagines women preparing the tea and talking of some intellectual or artistic subject quite at odds with the thoughts he has been having.

Lines 21-28:

The near repetition in lines 21 and 22 signals that Prufrock's attention has returned from the imagined room to his actual surroundings. It is evening, foggy, and his attention focuses on the fog mixed with chimney smoke, and then takes off in a metaphorical process that equates the movement of the fog with the movement of some seemingly cat-like creature around the structure of the city at evening. Prufrock's lyrical musing. here reflects the dream-like emotional state evoked by the fog.

The lines in this stanza are very close in length, so that along with the rhyme pattern of *a a b a* c *d e d a,* and the alliteration of "[l]icked," "[l]ingered," and "leap," a kind of trance-like state is established.

Lines 29-40:

Prufrock's reverie on the smoke or fog reminds him that dreamed or imagined activity has no correlation to actions or events in real time, so he determines that just as there is time for the fog and smoke, there is time to get himself adjusted to what he is about to do. However, at the fourth repetition of "There will be time" he is once more focusing on where he is going and what he is about to do there, and he is overwhelmed once again. Eliot exaggerates Prufrock's emotional state by paralleling it to those associated with acts of murder and creation. At this point the phrase "there will be time" transmutes into repetitions of the word "time" like a clock ticking the seconds of the present into Prufrock's past.

The reference to "works and days" is to an eighth century B.C. poem by Hesiod about a Greek farmer who urges his brother to work as hard as he himself does. Prufrock imagines other hands working harder than his, that will ultimately somehow necessitate his asking the "overwhelming question." However, he maintains he has time yet for a hundred dream-visions of cat-like fogs, for a hundred corrections to his thought process, before he arrives for tea.

Lines 41-42:

The reference above to having tea presents him with the repeated image in the rhymed couplet.

Lines 43-50:

Here Prufrock's thought process becomes infused with a sense of the ridiculous, as he pictures himself losing his resolve, turning and walking back down the stairs before even knocking on the door. The irony is that, seeing himself as silly, he begins to be aware of how others might see him, even to the point of including in the stream of his own thought (bracketed in the poem) disparaging comments that he imagines these others might make about him, comments that are in direct contradiction of how he sees himself.

Lines 51-54:

Prufrock's third repetition of "Do I dare?" is exaggerated to reflect the depth of his own dread. He repeats that while there is time for all these thoughts, the situation is still hopeless: as long as it takes to make a decision is as long as it takes to reverse that decision.

Lines 55-60:

Prufrock tries to explain *why* he is indecisive about his feelings toward the woman he is meeting for tea. It is because he knows the kind of social life he is moving toward. He knows how people who live together and have social obligations toward one another act-or are supposed to act. The visual image of the coffee spoons indicates that he himself has had innumerable cups of coffee in unbearable social situations. The aural image of the "voices dying" refers to difficult and embarrassing social conversations that falter while those involved pretend to be listening to music. And so, Prufrock asks himself, how can such a socially inept individual as he is ever hope to assume a part in real human life with this woman?

Lines 61-67:

Prufrock indicates that he is familiar with people who appraise him according to some set of standards that have nothing to do with who he considers himself to be. Eliot uses metaphor here to illustrate that such appraisals make Prufrock incapable of human response because he feels as if he is as insignificant and helpless as a bug stuck by a pin for collection and examination. The image of the "butt-ends" are what he thinks his "days and ways" must be reduced to in order to explain what he does, as the "butt-ends" of cigarettes are what remains after the pleasure of smoking.

Lines 68-75:

The tone softens here as Prufrock recalls a third thing that he has "known" as a result of social situations, symbolized by the image of feminine arms. These arms have a hint of the sensual in the bracketed information he provides that is suggestive of the earlier animal image of the fog as well as of the sexual associations of the hotels and restaurants. Prufrock realizes that this image of what he has "known" is at variance with those of the two preceding stanzas, and wonders what has shifted his thoughts. That it was the feminine appeal of a perfume he caught scent of continues the visual image of these arms, however, transforming the question asked at the end of each of those preceding stanzas. Now he asks, "Should I presume?" This implies that his desire for the female embrace is overriding his doubts. Indeed, the final line assumes he *will* "presume" by allowing him to consider "how" to begin.

Line 76:

This ellipsis acts to divide the first two sections of the poem; it also indicates that there were thoughts resulting from the final question of the preceding stanza that neither Prufrock nor Eliot wants to consider further.

Lines 77-79:

Eliot brings Prufrock and the reader back to the idea of how Prufrock might begin to talk to the woman he is going to meet. The image of "lonely men" symbolizes the loneliness of Prufrock. The use of an ellipsis within the sentence structure at the close of the stanza indicates further consideration, perhaps, of this loneliness, which is enhanced by the fact that these are the only two consecutive unrhymed lines in the poem.

Lines 80-81:

Prufrock acknowledges what he feels to be the utter hopelessness of his situation. The image of the "ragged claws" in the "silent seas" suggests that, as a creature of a "higher order" Prufrock's brain is doing him no good at all. In fact, it is clear that Prufrock feels that his ability to speak-which supposedly establishes his superiority over all other animals-is so inferior that he should be relegated to a world of silence.

Line 82:

The ellipsis here might mark further hopeless thoughts which have not been included, but more likely indicates the enormity of the realization Prufrock has just come to: his human life will be wasted as a result of his inability to participate fully in human relationships.

Lines 83-94:

There is a definite shift in tone here, in keeping with the image of evening made peaceful by "long fingers" caressing it into sleep. The internal ellipses indicate reconsiderations, so that perhaps the evening and (by metaphorical process) Prufrock's emotions are not so much "peacefully" at rest, perhaps they are "tired," or worse, shirking their duty. In any case, it is the evening now which is cat-like "beside you and me." And here it seems as if "you" might be hopefully referring to the woman with whom Prufrock has presumably had tea. But this peacefulness is disrupted as Prufrock wonders if he "has the strength" to ask this woman the "overwhelming question."

Despite the fact that Prufrock has agonized over the situation, he does not know whether he will be able to ask his question or not. His association of this behavior with the weeping and fasting that Biblical prophets were said to engage in establishes the basis for an analogy with the prophet John the Baptist. The irony is that it shouldn't take a prophet to tell you whether or not you yourself are going to do something. Eliot nicely accents this ironical stance by using the particular prophet John the Baptist, a proponent of chastity who was beheaded at the request of Herod's wife. Prufrock's sense of the ridiculousness of the situation once again asserts itself in the satiric inserted comment in the presentation of the image of his own head on the platter in place of John the Baptist's. Ultimately, though, it is clear to him that he is exaggerating, to no good effect, for the really important thing to consider is that he is no longer sure of himself as a human being. Accordingly, he is truly frightened at the image of the derision of the "eternal Footman"-which is, perhaps, death as a doorman holding Prufrock's coat and ushering him out of a life that he never had the courage to truly live.

Lines 95-106:

Another question sets the tone for this stanza, as Prufrock considers whether he could ask his "overwhelming question" within the context of the social trivialities of having tea. The use here of the Egyptian religious symbol of the scarab beetle, which rolls its excrement into a ball, is an intricate image compounded of the vulgar and the divine. It precisely expresses Prufrock's view of his situation.

He also imagines himself, incongruously, as a kind of Lazarus (whom Jesus raised from the dead) at this tea, who comes back from the dead place inside himself to tell this woman everything he learned there. But his imaginings carry him off to the point where he sees her casually asserting that his "overwhelming question" has nothing to do with anything that she said.

Lines 107-119:

Prufrock's thinking begins to fragment as a result of his frustration and dread. The stanza begins with an echo of the first line of the preceding stanza, then repeats a variation that leads into a series of recollections in two lines beginning with "After" as

Prufrock recites a series of events. In line 113 he acknowledges that he cannot say what he means.

It becomes clear with line 114 that Prufrock believes that he must adequately and specifically communicate the scope, the depth, the magnitude of what he thinks and feels about this woman so that the "meaning" he communicates will correspond with the "meaning" of something she has previously said or done. But he is so convinced that this will not happen that he can almost see her turning away from him. Eliot presents this with an image of his nerves projecting the picture of her failure to understand onto the screen of his imagination.

Line 120:

Here the ellipsis again emphasizes the full weight of what happens in this section, the sense of futility Prufrock experiences in the face of the impossibility of saying "just what I mean!" It further marks the transition into the state of mind that occurs after the full realization of this impossibility.

Lines 121-129:

Prufrock emphatically answers the question he has asked in the preceding two stanzas. His reference to Hamlet, and the phrase in the same line, "nor was meant to be," calls up an association with Hamlet's soliloquy, "To be or not to be?- That is the question." Clearly there is a play on words here. On one level, the asking of the question and the establishing of the relationship with the woman is "not to be." On another level, Prufrock is suggesting that he is not "meant *to be,"* implying that he is meant, perhaps, merely to exist and never to really participate in life. On an existential level, the line could indicate that Prufrock is "meant" " *not to be,"* that he might as well be dead for not being able to live as people live.

Prufrock describes himself in a self-satiric way in lines 123-129, noting that his unimportant presence will help to fill out a crowd scene, and finally referring to himself as "obtuse," which means "ignorant" as well as "insensitive." Clearly, Prufrock is not "insensitive"; rather, he is far too sensitive. But he is ignorant of how social relationships provide structure for emotional life. Prufrock determines that he will never be the main character in his own play, although he might have a function as "the Fool," or court jester, who can provide light entertainment. The word "Fool" also alludes to how foolish he is in his inaction.

Lines 130-131:

The ellipses indicate the passage of time, as Prufrock feels himself growing older. Line 131 has been variously interpreted as having to do with some kind of fashion of the times, as well as pertaining to how people roll up their pant legs to keep from getting

them wet as they walk on the shore. It could also be read as reference to getting shorter as one gets older, so that the trousers would need to be rolled up.

Lines 132-134:

The questions Prufrock asks here are satiric versions of the serious question he tried to ask of the woman, and of the useless questions he has asked of himself. The satire is intensified with his image of himself as an old man who parts his hair "behind" in order to comb it forward over a receding hairline. The use of the rhymed couplet here is particularly interesting because elsewhere the absurdity of the rhymed couplets had ironic effect. Here the rhyme seems merely silly, as if to reflect the lack of thought Prufrock intends to put into the things he does as an old man.

There are stories of mermaids falling in love with human men. This reference also echoes the emotional frustration expressed by the earlier sea image of the "pair of ragged claws."

Lines 135:

Eliot uses this image of the mermaids to signal that Prufrock has come close to experiencing something wonderful and magical and strange, but that Prufrock ultimately fails to believe that the singing he has heard will ever be for him.

Lines 136-138:

The image in these three lines of Prufrock remaining distant and apart from the emotional life he desires adds meaning to the preceding lines. Prufrock as an old man walking along the beach and remembering that he had actually at one time seen the mermaids, as well as heard their singing, is especially poignant, and helps us see him as someone in crisis.

The words "seen" and "seaward" echo the earlier "silent seas" of line 81.

Lines 139-141:

The use of the first person plural might be convincing confirmation of the reading of "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock " as a soliloquy or interior monologue of a divided self. Eliot uses the image of the sea and "sea-girls," and the repetition of "singing," as well as the associations now accumulated around the word "overwhelming" (with its meanings of "submerging" and "engulfing") to symbolize the deeply emotional place which Prufrock could not reconcile with human life in the real world, thus necessitating the division in himself.

It is another of Eliot's ironic touches that Prufrock's "Lovesong" could only be sung to him by human voices that would wake his divided self to drown in the sea of his own emotions.

Themes

Alienation and Loneliness

In this poem, the speaker's poor ability to relate to other people, especially women, has him playing out a long dialogue in his mind, consisting of fragments of his past that are so intensely personal that he does not bother to connect them into a logical flow. The "us" he refers to in the first stanza is himself, which tells us that he is a person who is accustomed to being alone, to addressing another part of his mind in the way a more social person would talk to a friend. One of the strongest indications of his loneliness is the repeated use of questions to himself: he is so desperately alone in his thought that he examines every little aspect about his behavior, so curious about what people will think of him that he asks the only person he can talk to about it, the one person who knows no more than himself. This is a sign of social inexperience. In the eighth stanza, he imagines that the stares of others will pin him to the wall for inspection, the way an insect is held in place, "pinned and wiggling." He is so deeply immersed in his loneliness, so tragically alienated, that he fears even the first basic action that would bridge the gap between another person and himself: eye contact.

The main cause of his alienation is his low self-esteem, causing him to shrink in embarrassment from other people at the same time that he is wondering if he might not deserve better, if he is not setting his aims too low. Critics have pointed to the lines "I should have been a pair of ragged claws / Scuttling across the floors of the silent seas" as an indication of Prufrock's attitude toward women, exploring it in dozens of ways, from literary allusions to the sexual practices of crayfish in Eliot's native St. Louis. Regardless of the lines' origins, it is clearly an image that isolates the speaker, and the use the words "ragged" and "scuttling" define a fantasy in which the speaker clearly does not think well of himself.

Time

Balanced against Prufrock's morbid introversion-his fear that entering a relation with the woman he is on his way to meet will entangle him too deeply in the drab, mundane things of the world-is the fear that time is slipping away from him and making him old. He worries about losing his hair and losing the youthful muscle in his arms and legs, which drives him forward to do what he set out to do, and yet he hesitates because of the suspicion that the situation is not entirely drastic yet. After the third stanza establishes for us the fact that Prufrock is familiar with the dark, seamy side of life, the fourth stanza contains his constant self reassurances that "there will be time... ," indicating that he is worried that all of life's mysteries (the fog, murder, creation) will be over once he has made it to his destination. There will be "time yet for a hundred indecisions" he tells himself, afraid that he is going to lose the luxury of infinite possibility. He knows, though, that time will narrow his possibilities down one by one, systematically making each possibility real or not real: having already seen the eternal

Footman, Death, he is familiar that there will not be time for everything. Although Prufrock is not sure that he wants to commit to comfort, a world of "sunsets and teacups and sprinkled streets," he knows that- the time he has for indecision is not limitless, and he fears that waiting too long will leave him a lonely old man, sitting in the window, smoking.

Doubt and Ambiguity

Near the end of the poem Prufrock declares, "I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was 1 meant to be." To many, the defining characteristic of Shakespeare's Hamlet is his inability to conquer or accept his doubts and settle upon one course of action to follow. Having seen Prufrock's thought process twist throughout stanza after stanza, and having seen him fret over whether the life he is committing to is the one he really wants, or if he has chosen unwisely because of social pressure, or if his body is so worn out that he has no choice left at all, the reader could rightly disagree with him and say "Yes," he is too Hamlet. The indecisiveness of Hamlet is clearly there: what he seems to be denying is the "Prince" part of the identity, as if the title of royalty is too glamorous for a humble fool like himself. Ironically, it is this self-consciousness, this constant reminder that he is a lowly being, that conflicts with his rebellious nature and causes Prufrock the most indecisiveness. Near the middle of the poem his constant questioning of himself takes on a brief pattern: "how should I presume?" he asks, and after another stanza he asks again, followed at the end of the following stanza with "should I presume?" In this sequence we see that his self-questioning, his long one-man dialogue that is meant to think things through and settle some issues, is actually working backward, taking him further from decision. In this poem the speaker's doubts do not reach an answer, they just multiply, so when he finally decides to take action it is not with comfort or certainty but with regret; he sees his move from contemplation to action as a drowning.

Style

"The Love Song of 1. Alfred Prufrock" begins with an epigraph, a quote that sets the tone for the poem to follow. This epigraph, included in the poem in the original Italian, is from Dante's *Divine Comedy.* Its use here emphasizes Eliot's belief in the instructive function of poetry, as well as his conviction that it was a poet's responsibility to be aware of and build on the established tradition of poetry.

This poem (exclusive of the epigraph) is structured into four sections, with each section separated by an ellipsis, a mark used in conventional punctuation to indicate an omission, but used here to signal either time passing between thoughts relevant to the subject under consideration, or information considered too obvious to be included.

Eliot's belief that "No verse is free for the serious poet" is apparent in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." This poem is written in free verse with varying line lengths, but Eliot employs rhyme as a major structural component in its composition.

In fact, in the 131 lines of the main poem structure, only 12 lines are unrhymed. Note the pattern of the rhyme in the first stanza, beginning "Let us go then, you and I.. ,,": a couplet-an unrhymed line-a series of three couplets-an unrhymed line-a couplet. Such a pattern serves to establish coherence in the stanza, as well as to create a distinctive music.

Eliot also found repetition useful to establish rhythms of ideas as well as sound rhythms. Note the repetition of the word "time" in the two stan zas beginning "And indeed there will be time " in the first section.

Conventional punctuation and sentence structure are used in this poem, but capital letters at the beginnings of lines stress lineation, thus balancing the importance of the sentence with the importance of the line. While Eliot maintained that poetry should conform to current conversational speech, he emphasized the musical qualities of speech, as well as the imagistic and symbolic possibilities of words, by his use of lineation.

The varying line lengths and stanza lengths of this poem are indicative of Eliot's refusal to impose a form on the thoughts and emotions at the center of the composition. It was not his purpose to discover or create a new form for poetry, but to free the poet from set forms in order to allow each poem to create its own form-in this case a "love song" which Eliot sings onto the page for the reader.

Historical Context

In a review of *Catholic Anthology* 1914-15, edited by the poet Ezra Pound and containing "The Love Song of 1. Alfred Prufrock," critic Arthur Waugh noted that if "the unmetrical, incoherent banalities of these literary 'Cubists' were to triumph, the State of Poetry would be threatened with anarchy." His remarks are clearly intended to frighten lovers of poetry and to dismiss the authors as bungling amateurs. Little could Waugh have guessed that he was identifying the very effects that the poets intended, and that his criticism is only of interest to us today because it signifies that, by the time he was writing, the Modern Age had arrived. Modernism is a blanket term that we use for a great number of artistic and philosophical movements (including Cubism in painting) that were intent on throwing away the old standards and replacing them with work that is closer to the way the people really live and think.

This struggle between life and theory has always gone on and continues to this day. In music, for example, rap has been embraced by its listeners as an authentic expression of how people feel, but it is scoffed at by music connoisseurs for its lack of melodic complexity-"incoherent banalities,"_ as Waugh would say. After years of being underground and rejected, rap has now reached a level of acceptance that makes it a prime target to be dismantled by the next new upstarts. Similarly, the rise of Modernism was a reaction to Victorianism, which was a reaction to Romanticism, and on throughout history. Since the chain is unbroken, there is no clear place to start tracing Modernism's roots, but one good place might be in 1798, with the publication of William Wordsworth's and Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Lyrical Ballads.* In response to the formal, strict poetry that had come before him, Wordsworth wrote that poetry should drawn from "a selection of language really used by man." Poetry, he felt, was too far out of touch with reality, and he encouraged writers to change the way they thought about their job. Out of this grew the Romantic movement, which included such great early-nineteenth century writers as Keats, Shelley, Byron, Tennyson, Emerson, Melville, Poe, and Dickinson. Romanticism was a spirit of intellectual freedom that affected all areas of society. The individual, especially the artistic individual, was held to be of the highest importance to Romanticism: creativity was worshipped.

The last half of the nineteenth century saw the triumph of industry and capitalism, and is considered a less humanistic time. Novels concerned themselves with social structure, and poetry became more formal, more stylized, emphasizing how things were said over what was said. The Industrial Revolution brought trains and eventually automobiles, stepping up the pace of life: reading became less and less relevant, a luxury to be enjoyed by those who were socially comfortable. Throughout the period, though, there were scattered elements that would eventually make it impossible for the forces of social order to hold: Marx and Engels published *The Communist Manifesto* in 1848; Darwin published *Origins of the Species* in 1859; Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* came out in

1900. Each of these created a revolution in its own intellectual area and lead to the Modernist suspicion of all previously accepted beliefs.

There is no particular philosophy of Modernism, but instead we measure its growth by looking at various revolutionary movements in the arts. In 1909, for instance, the Futurist movement in Italy released its "Foundation Manifesto of Futurism" (bold artistic movements often announce themselves with manifestos), praising "aggressive action, the mutual leap, the punch and slap." At the same time, Pound fell in with a group of poets in London and discussed principles that eventually became known as Imagism, known for its rejection of poetic conventions. Pound was also instrumental in founding Vorticism, which was based on change and motion and was supposed, Pound said, to "sweep out the past century as surely as Attila swept across Europe." These three examples of literary movements at the time give us a sense of the new values that came with Modernism: embracing instead of avoiding the industrial world; an emphasis on powerful, not pretty, poetry; a willingness to use any tools and break any rules in order to capture what the world was really like; in genera], a devotion to a higher social cause (think of all of those manifestos) and an unwillingness to simply create art for its own sake.

Critical Overview

According to Vincent Miller, "By 1914 the age of the heroic achiever was over. That was... the truth [this] love song pinned down in a startlingly new and creative way for an entire generation." Indeed, American poet John Berryman declares that "Modernist poetry begins" in the simile "like a patient etherised upon a table." He recognizes, however, that even the title manifests a decidedly Modernist "split" in its juxtaposition of the full romance of the term "love song" against such a highly formalized name as J. Alfred Prufrock. This is a technique Eliot discovered in reading the French Symbolist poets Jules Laforgue and Charles Baudelaire. He declared that his early free verse was "more 'verse' than 'free,'" adopting Laforgue's practice of "regularly rhyming lines of irregular length, with the rhyme coming in irregular places." This creates the music of 'The Love Song of 1. Alfred Prufrock," and inspired American poet Delmore Schwartz to theorize that "[t]here is [a mode of] poetry whose chief aim is that of incantation, of inducing a certain state of emotion." It is clearly the intent of "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" to involve the reader at an emotional level, and Eliot's use of the second person "you" in the opening line is an expert strategy toward this. But whether the "you" Prufrock is speaking to begins as the poet Eliot or as some imaginary companion, it is evident that, as Northrop Frye maintains, Prufrock ultimately is talking to himself, and that "[i]n addressing a 'you' who is also himself' the pattern is set for a division between Prufrock and the world he contemplates-until he stands irrevocably separated from that world.

M. L. Rosenthal contends that "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock " projects "an actual inner state... of one type of cultivated American psyche of Eliot's generation." He further notes "a strongly adolescent flavor," asserting that the poem "positively sweats panic at the challenge of adult sexuality and of living up to one's ideal of what it is to be manly in any sort of heroic model." Ann P. Brady says that Eliot was aware of this, maintaining that the poem reflects Prufrock back "from the world in which he moves" in a "clinically hard" way, and that this contrast with romantic aspirations-the "juxtaposition of lyricism with the tone of satire"-creates the Modernist tension. She finds the satire unusually effective in Eliot's coupling of rhyme words that "are absurd," particularly "icescrisis, platter-matter, flicker-snicker," producing what she calls "deflation by association."

English novelist May Sinclair notes Eliot's concern with reality, with his careful presentation "of the street and the drawing-room as they are," as well as "[w]ith ideas... that are realities and not abstractions " Thus "Prufrock" presents not only a man in the world but, as James F. Knapp says, "a mind shaped along the lines of [Modernist] depth psychology " . He sees this reflected in the poem by the abandonment of "logical continuity" necessitated by Eliot's material. The radicalness of "Prufrock," according to Knapp, is not simply in its break with poetic tradition, but in its use of old conventions and new ones to keep poetry "in touch with a changing world."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Marisa Pagnattaro is a freelance writer and is the Book Review Editor and an Editorial Board Member of the Georgia Bar Journal. *She is a teaching assistant at the University of Georgia, Athens. In the following essay, Pagnattaro provides a close reading of "The Love Song of* 1. *Alfred Prufrock, " emphasizing its comic elements.*

It is a mistake to approach T.S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" with the same seriousness as for *The Waste Land.* To enjoy this poem and get the most out of the verse, readers should have a wry sense of humor. Prufrock is an anxiety-filled, insecure, middle-aged bachelor who fears that his expressions of love will be rebuffed. First published in *Poetry* in 1915, and then collected in *Prufrock and Other Observations* in 1917, Eliot used the traditional form of the dramatic monologue for the speaker, Prufrock, to express his romantic dilemma. The dramatic monologue is generally associated with nineteenth-century poets such as Robert Browning and Alfred, Lord Tennyson, and is characterized by the voice of a single speaker who reveals something personal to the reader.

The memorable title of this poem may have been derived from an advertisement in Eliot's hometown. In *The Invisible Poet: T.S. Eliot,* Hugh Kenner revealed that the "name of Prufrock-Littau, furniture wholesalers, appeared in advertisements in St. Louis, Missouri" at the beginning of this century. Although Eliot claimed that any approbation of the "now-famous German surname must have been 'quite unconscious,'" Kenner suggested that this is an early example of the "rich mischief' of Eliot's mind. By adding "J. Alfred" to the name, Eliot combines a sense of mysterious dignity to the ridiculousness of "Prufrock." Compound this with the title's claim that the work is a love song, and readers are on their way to appreciate the dry humor underlying this very famous work.

The poem opens with an epigram from Dante's *Inferno* in which Guido de Montefeltro, who is consumed in flames as punishment for giving false counsel, confesses his shame because he believes that it cannot be reported back on earth. In context, this excerpt is essentially Prufrock's assurance that he can confide in his reader without fear of shame for what he is about to disclose. And so the poem opens: "Let us go then, you and 1," which is to say, "come along and hear my story because I can trust you." The speaker then entreats his reader to join him on an evening stroll, presumably through Boston (where there are "sawdust restaurants with oyster shells"), but not to ask "What is it?" just yet. Instead of just laying bare his quandary, the "overwhelming question," Prufrock says, "Let us go and make our visit"; he takes his reader along on a social call to reveal his inadequacies. As the poem progresses, however, it becomes apparent that the "you-and-I" format begins to collapse and Prufrock is merely talking to himself.

Prufrock first travels through the grunge of the city, filled with yellow fog and smoke (not unlike the industrial waste of Eliot's native St. Louis). Eliot imbues the scene with catlike characteristics, giving the evening a somewhat seductive feline tone: "The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the window-panes"; "Licked its tongue"; "Slipped by the terrace,

made a sudden leap" "Curled once about the house, and fell asleep." Prufrock next enters into a world of butlers and tea. Here, in an arena of vacuous social chatter, "the women come and go / talking of Michelangelo." This is the world of writer Henry James, in-which proper etiquette and social grace must prevail. By opening the fourth stanza with "And indeed there will be time," Eliot echoes the memorable line "Had we but world enough and time," from Andrew Marveil's seduction poem, "To His Coy Mistress." Ironically, Prufrock does not feel compelled to seize the day. There is plenty of time for indecision as Prufrock pictures his mind racing through "a hundred visions and revisions" in the short span of time between the serving and "the taking of a toast and tea."

Prufrock repeats his conviction that "indeed there will be time" to wonder" 'Do I dare?' and 'Do I dare?"-that is, first, does he dare to make a declaration of love, and, if not, does he then dare to flee down the stairs after he rang the doorbell, knowing that the subject of his affections may spot the "bald spot in the middle" of his hair. Prufrock makes a desperate attempt to attire himself accordingly and not to overdo it with his "necktie rich and modest, but asserted by a simple pin." Yet, in his mind, Prufrock envisions his contemporaries commenting on his deteriorating appearance, imagining the remarks, "How his hair is growing thin!" and "But how his arms and legs are thin!" Balding and scrawny, the self-deprecating Prufrock again wonders, "Do I dare / disturb the universe?" In other words, does he dare to shake up the stasis of his social universe by expressing his love?

Prufrock falls into a state of melancholy by lamenting that his life may actually be nearly over: "For I have known them all already, known them all- / Have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons, / I have measured out my life with coffee spoons." Far from living a life of adventure, Prufrock has played it safe, passing his days sipping coffee. He then attempts to lay himself bare: "And when I am formulated, sprawling on a pin, / When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall. ..." Picturing himself like an insect mounted in an entomologist's collection, Prufrock wonders where he would begin his story, to tell about "all the butt-ends" of his "days and ways."

After posing the rhetorical question "And how shall I begin?" Prufrock digresses in the five lines that are bracketed off from the rest of the poem by a series of dots. He reveals his walks in the working-class part of the city, where "lonely men in shirt-sleeves" are "leaning out of windows." Prufrock seems to fear becoming like those forlorn men, isolated from love and left to spend their evenings "watching the smoke that rises from the pipes." The dejected Prufrock then declares "I should have been a pair of ragged claws / Scuttling across the floors of silent seas" as if to say that he would be better off as a carefree crustacean instead of the lovelorn man he has become.

When he returns to his monologue, Prufrock flirts with the notion of himself as a heroic character, but dismisses each comparison. First he invokes the image of the prophet John the Baptist who was murdered and his head brought in on a platter to Princess Salome who had requested his death. Prufrock laments that he has seen his "head [grown slightly bald] brought in on a platter," but acknowledges "I am no prophet." He has been slain at the behest of a woman, yet lacks the heroic quality of John the

Baptist. In fact, he has seen the "moment of [his] greatness flicker" when "the eternal Footman hold my coat, and snicker"; the hopelessly intimidated Prufrock has been snubbed by arrogant servants at the homes of genteel society where he visits.

Next, once again drawing on imagery from Marvell's poem ("To have bitten off the matter with a smile, / To have squeezed the universe into a ball"), Prufrock envisions himself as Lazarus, who rose from the dead. He imagines himself returning to the social scene saying, "'I am Lazarus, come from the dead, / Come back to tell you all'" (presumably to tell them about his romantic affections for one in particular, perhaps even of a marriage proposal). Instead of being met with great enthusiasm, Prufrock pictures the woman he adores as "settling a pillow by her head" coolly saying, 'That is not what I meant at all. / That is not it, at all." In this scenario, she flatly rejects him, suggesting that he has misunderstood her social politeness for romantic interest. Prufrock again repeats her curt and cruel response in the next stanza to further underscore his horror at receiving such a social death sentence that leaves him looking foolish before his acquaintances.

Lastly, he acknowledges that he is "not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be." Like Hamlet, Prufrock wrestles with a paradigm of indecision ("To be or not to be"), but Prufrock lacks the ability to act. "Deferential, glad to be of use, / Politic, cautious, and meticulous," Prufrock is much more a Polonious than a Hamlet. Aging and silly, Prufrock is left only able to dream of romance.

Several of the most memorable lines in the poem follow this anti-heroic sequence. Prufrock muses: "I grow old... I grow old... / I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled. / Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare to eat a peach? / I shall wear white flannel trousers, and walk upon the beach."

With this he creates yet another ridiculous image of himself with his hair slicked to cover his bald spot, trousers cuffed in youthful fashion, considering the act of high daring of eating a peach in easily stained white slacks. The "Do I dare?" of romance is reduced to an act of ingesting a notoriously juicy piece of fruit. Prufrock is defeated in love by his own inaction.

As the poem draws to a close, Prufrock admits, "I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each II I do not think that they will sing to me." These mythical sea creatures believed to coax sailors out to sea with their seductive songs sing to each other in Prufrock's world; they will not enchant him into action. He sees the mermaids at a distance "riding seaward on the waves I Combing the white hair of the waves blown back." Prufrock will never enter their world or the realm of love and romance in his own world.

In the last stanza of the poem, Prufrock lingers on the dream-like periphery of the sea of desire by "sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown I Till human voices wake us, and we drown." Even though Prufrock uses the pronoun "we"-as if he is referring to the reader who apparently accompanied him at the beginning of his narrative-he seems to

have slipped into a dream-like state, waiting for the human voices of reality to alert him to the pitiful fact that he will be unable to sustain himself with his dreams.

When 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" was first published, it was met with a wide range of criticism. In a 1916 assessment in *Quarterly Review,* English critic Arthur Waugh dismissed the poem as mere "cleverness." The author of an unsigned article in *Literary Review* denounced Prufrock as "neither witty nor amusing" and suggested that "Mr. Eliot could do finer work on traditional lines." In sharp contrast, American poet Ezra Pound praised Eliot's work and defended him against his critics' attacks. Since those initial reviews, Prufrock has baffled many critics who have sought to uncover some deep, dark meaning of "Prufrock." Biographer Peter Ackroyd reported that Eliot's own commentary was essentially limited to his remark, "I'm afraid that J. Alfred Prufrock didn't have much of a love life." This simple explanation should be taken seriously and the poem should be enjoyed.

Source: Marisa Pagnattaro, in an essay for *Poetry for Stu dents.* Gale, 1997.

Critical Essay #2

In the following excerpt, Fryxell characterizes Eliot's character J. Alfred Prufrock as a trimmer (a term from Dante's Inferno)-a "lifeless, spiritless, mindless" person.

T.S. Eliot is one of the best known poets in the twentieth century. And yet, when "The Waste Land," which is Eliot's longest, his most difficult, and certainly his most controversial poem, was first published in the year 1922, T.S. Eliot was comparatively unknown, despite a volume of poetry he had written entitled *Prufrock and Other Observations,* which appeared in 1917, and which contained, among other poems, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock."...

Eliot's poems certainly are complex poems; they're never simple ones, and Eliot himself justified their complexity by arguing that the poet, who is to serve as the interpreter and critic of a complex age, must write complex poetry; and certainly, I think, we would all agree that our age is a complex age. Eliot's constant use of allusions in his poems is based upon his theory that the poet of today should write as if all the poets of the past were looking over his shoulder. The modern poet, then, must be conscious of the tradition which he has inherited, and he must carry on that tradition himself. "The Waste Land" is a cluttered mass of altered quotations: Eliot alters these quotations deliberately in order to suggest the loss of the vitality of the traditions of the past: poetic, moral, aesthetic, religious, social. It is the debasement of that tradition which has brought about the spiritual and the intellectual sterility of the modern age. And it is this wasteland of the twentieth- century, this intellectual, spiritual, moral, aesthetic sterility which is the theme of the poem.

Allusion-jammed, though Eliot's poetry is, and dealing with complex emotions and complex ideas as he does, the language of his poems is still concrete; the images which he uses are fresh; they are striking and never completely decorative. And so, for instance, in the "Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" the evening is described as being spread out against the sky like a patient etherized upon a table. This image is fresh and striking; it is a most unusual kind of image, and the image is also functional: that image describes the passivity of the evening as Prufrock sees it. Of course, everything in the poem is seen through Prufrock's eyes. The image also describes something of the half-dead condition of Prufrock himself, who is helpless, finally, as is a patient who is etherized upon a table. Or take the description of the yellow fog as if it were a cat. That description is a striking, vivid image, describing the slow settling of the fog over the city, and it suggests possibly also Prufrock's renunciation of his decision to disturb his universe of dilettante ladies by bringing a breath of real life to them. 'The fog," we are told, "curled once about the house, and fell asleep." And so, too, in the course of the poem, Prufrock allows his decision to fall asleep. The cat image, here, also suggests sex. This is another desire of Prufrock which ends finally in inertia. Prufrock's failure in love is synonymous, you see, with the whole failure of society; his hopeless isolation is synonymous with the isolation of each trimmer from his fellow trimmers in Eliot's "Waste Land."...

'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" concerns one of Eliot's Wastelanders. Prufrock is a member of the decadent aristocracy, just as Sweeney, in "Sweeney Among the Nightingales," is representative of Eliot's proletariats in the *Prufrock* volume of poetry. The various characters that Eliot depicts in this, his first volume of poetry, are almost below the level, really, of animals and human beings. These characters seem to feel no real passions and they have no real thoughts; they are machines without the gas or oil that keeps a machine going. They run on momentum without a genuine spark of life within them. Prufrock himself is something of an exception, but not much of a one.

Prufrock lives in a world in which art and music have become the idle conversation of dilettante women, who are spiritually, sexually, and intellectually dead, who spend their lives in an eternal round of afternoon tea parties, who may talk of art because it is expected that the class to which they belong should know something about it, but for whom the meaning and the vitality of art have long since been drained in the cycle of their teacups. Prufrock is one of this group. Prufrock is a dilettante like "the women who come and go-talking of Michelangelo." Prufrock, we come to see, is as fastidious about his dress as they are, is as spiritually, sexually, and intellectually dead as they are. Like them, Prufrock has measured out his life "in coffee spoons," and his life has been as empty, as meaningless as theirs has been.

Prufrock is a trimmer. I trust that many of you, at least, know that trimmers were those souls in Dante's *Inferno* who were condemned to the vestibule of hell because they had never really lived, although they were supposedly alive; but they never really did enough evil to be sentenced to hell, and they never did enough good while they were alive to get to purgatory to start their way up to heaven. The Trimmers were lifeless, spiritless, mindless people....

Eliot uses Dante's trimmers in order to characterize the twentieth century. For Eliot, the vast majority of men and women of the twentieth century are trimmers: they are intellectually and spiritually dead, afraid of life, afraid of living, afraid of facing either good or evil and of experiencing really either, afraid of taking sides either for or against God, living in a sterile land; breeding spiritually and intellectually sterile children, slaves to the machine and conventions of the age, fearful of speaking out against either, fearful of taking either the way which leads to spiritual regeneration or the way which leads to damnation....

J. Alfred Prufrock is no Hamlet who will disturb and rectify the evil of his world, the evil which consists for Prufrock in its decadence, its spiritual, moral, intellectual, sexual, aesthetic sterility. Hamlet can cleanse the rottenness of Denmark; Prufrock can get only a glimpse of the sterility of this world, but he is helpless to do anything about it. "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" is thus his swan song to life, but it's also a song that he himself sings, for the poem is a dramatic monologue. He sings it in an effort to justify himself for not following the impulses, the suppressed desires of his alter-ego. And the effort damns him. But because the poem also shows that he has come to know his own inadequacies, to know that he is a trimmer, I think finally we do pity J. Alfred Prufrock. I always have....

Eliot builds his poem around the repetition of three central themes or motifs. The first of these is the time theme. This is given in the refrain, "And indeed there will be time." The time theme serves as an excuse for Prufrock for not disturbing his universe, for there is always time to put things off, as talking to his alter-ego-the "you" in the "Let us go now, you and I"-he shows that he will put off telling these women, and he will put off revealing his suppressed desires, apparently, for one of these women. There is always a tomorrow, there is al ways time And there will be time for Prufrock to change his mind about disturbing his universe; there will be time for Prufrock to put off doing it forever; there will be time to say farewell to the glimpse of real life he has had. There will be time for Prufrock to sink back eternally among the rounds of teacups.

The second theme of Prufrock is the "Do I dare" theme, in which Prufrock questions his ability to disturb his universe. This theme, allied as it is with the first theme and with the third theme as all three are allied one with the other, underscores the essential spiritual and moral cowardice of this man. Deliberately, Eliot has Prufrock begin this theme with a grandiose question when Prufrock asks, "Do I dare disturb the universe?" But before the end of the poem, this question degenerates into "Do I dare to eat a peach?" This symbolizes in its degeneration not only Prufrock's moral cowardice but also his essential concern with himself, from the outgoing desire to aid others in the question "Do I dare disturb the universe?" to the ingoing concern with his digestion.

The third theme is one of world weariness, which is begun in the line "For I have known them all already, known them all." This theme underscores Prufrock's weariness with the life that he leads, which is shown most effectively in the line "For I have measured out my life with coffee spoons." As Eliot develops this theme, he shows also Prufrock's bondage to the life which he is so weary of and his inability to bring any life to the half-alive world in which he lives. This theme is modified to stress Prufrock's renunciation of his plan. Prufrock must find some excuse for not doing what he, or rather, I should say, what his alter ego, had hoped to do; and so he finds it by rationalizing that it would not have been worthwhile after all to bring his breath of life into the sterile world, that he would have been misunderstood, that to bring life into this world he would have had to be like Lazarus come to life, "Come back to tell you all." But he is not a John the Baptist, not a Hamlet. He is only, finally, a pathetic trimmer, J. Alfred Prufrock....

And finally,... let me comment on Eliot's use of just one rhyme within the poem, found in these lines: "Should I, after tea and cakes and ices, Have the strength to force the moment to its crisis?" The two words which rhyme, of course, are "ices" and "crisis," and the rhyming of these two words is deliberately ridiculous, as ridiculous as Prufrock is himself at times, as ridiculous as Prufrock certainly is here: he's a sexually repressed man, growing old, with a bald spot in the middle of his hair, who can't you see, even rise to any kind of passion. Thus, his love song can never be anything but a song of frustration, of despair; it can never be sung to anyone except the "you," and the wishes and the desires of that "you" lose to the "I," who has revealed why the "you" in Prufrock's monologue can never dominate the man's actions.

Source: Donald R. Fryxell, "Understanding 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,'" in *Robert Frost's Chicken Feather; And Other Lectures,* from the 1968 Augustana College

NDEA English Institute, edited by Arthur R. Huseboe, Augustana College Press, November, 1969, pp. 33-44.

Critical Essay #3

In the following excerpt, Berryman focuses on Prufrock's struggle and ultimate inability to propose marriage.

To begin with Eliot's title, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," is the second half quite what the first led us to expect? A man named 1. Alfred Prufrock could hardly be expected to sing a love song; he sounds too well dressed. His name takes something away from the notion of a love song; the form of the title, that is to say, "i"s reductive. How does he begin singing?

Let us go then, you and I,
When the evening is spread out against the sky...

That sounds very pretty-lyrical-he does seem, after all, in spite of his name, to be inviting her for an evening; there is a nice rhyme-it sounds like other dim romantic verse. Then comes the third line:

Like a patient etherised upon a table...

With this line, modern poetry begins.

In the first place, the third line proves that the author of the first two lines did not mean them. They were a come-on, designed merely to get the reader off guard, so that he could be knocked down. The form, again, is reductive; an expectation has been created only to be diminished or destroyed. (Presently it will prove that "you" is not the woman at all, since "you" is invited to make a visit with "I" *to* her; we can hardly say yet who "you" is; an assumption has been destroyed.) And the word "then"-"Let us go *then"-is* really very unpromising; if he had only said, "Let us go," it would have sounded much more as if they were going to go; "Let us go then" sounds as if he had been giving it thought, and thought suggests hesitation. Of course he never goes at all: *the* visit, involving the "overwhelming question," the proposal of marriage, is never made. Here again we come on a reduction....

Eliot's manner is highly sophisticated, but perhaps we ought not to call the poem sophisticated. Let us call it primitive. The poem pretends to be a love song. It is something much more practical. It is a study-a debate by Prufrock with himself over the *business* of proposing marriage, agreeing to lay your fate in someone else's hands, undertaking to spend your life with her, to beget and rear children, and so on. He never makes it. The first half of the poem looks forward to the proposal, the second half looks back on how it *would* have gone if it had gone at all. The poem is intensely anti-romantic, and its extremely serious subject, in a so-called Love Song, is another rebuke to the (probably romantic) reader. Primitive societies take a dim view of not marrying. Hawaiian mythology, for instance, describes a god called Nangganaaag, whose job it is to stand with an immense club on the Road to Paradise and smash off it, into nothingness, any unmarried male who, having died, tries to get by. This way of thinking

is precisely Eliot's. Late in the poem Prufrock looks forward with dismay (and a certain jaunty pathos) to his endless bachelorhood-the sameness and triviality that are the lot of one who never succeeded in adopting his human responsibilities at all. It is clear that the poet sympathizes with Prufrock. It is also clear that the poet damns Prufrock. Some of the basic emotions of the poem are primitive also-fear, malice-but lust is absent, and the prevailing surface tone is one of civilized, over civilized anxiety. Prufrock's feelings are rather abstract; he never makes the woman real at all, except in one terrible respect, which let us reserve a little. He is concerned with himself. He is mentally ill, neurotic, incapable of love. But the problem that he faces is a primitive problem.

Eliot brings to bear on Prufrock's dilemma four figures out of the spiritual history of man: Michelangelo, John the Baptist, Lazarus, and Hamlet. Prufrock identifies himself, in his imagination, with Lazarus; he says that he is *not* the Baptist or Hamlet. About the first all he says is:

In the room the women come and go
Talking of Michelangelo.

What are we to make of this? There is a twittering of women's voices. Their subject? A type of volcanic masculine energy-sculptor, architect, as well as painter-at the height of one of the supreme periods of human energy, the Italian Renaissance. Chit-chat. *Reduction,* we may say. Michelangelo, everything that mattered about him forgotten or not understood, has become a topic for women's voices -destructive, without even realizing it. Then Prufrock says,

Though I have seen my head (grown slightly bald)
brought in upon a platter,
I am no prophet

The situation is a visit, or the imagination of a visit, to the woman; it was *women* who got the Baptist beheaded. We might phrase the meaning as: I announce no significant time to come, I am the forerunner of (not children, not a Saviour) nothing. Then Prufrock is speculating about how it *would* have been, If he had

squeezed the universe into a ball
To roll it toward some overwhelming question,
To say: "I am Lazarus, come from the dead,
Come back to tell you all, I shall tell you all"

We have seen Prufrock already imagined as dead, the suggestion of the epigraph, and at the end

of the poem he drowns. Here he thinks of himself as *come back.* Lazarus, perhaps, is the person whom one would most like to interview-another character from sacred history, not Christ's forerunner but the subject of the supreme miracles (reported, unfortunately, only in the Fourth Gospel)-=the one man who would tell us ... what it is like. Prufrock has a message for the woman that is or ought to be of similar importance:

here I am, out of my loneliness, at your feet; I am this man full of love, trust, hope; decide my fate.

Now-postponing Hamlet for a second-what Prufrock imagines the woman as saying in return for his Lazarus-communication explains his despair:

If one, settling a pillow by her head,
Should say: "That is not what I meant at all. That is not it, at all,"

Here the reason for his inability to propose becomes clear. He is convinced that she will (or would) respond with the most insulting and unmanning of all attitudes: Let's be *friends;* I never thought of you as a lover or husband, only a friend. What the women's voices did to Michelangelo, her voice is here imagined as doing to him, unmanning him; the sirens' voices at the end of the poem are yet to come. This is the central image of Prufrock' s fear: what he cannot face....

As for Hamlet, Prufrock says he is "not Prince Hamlet." He is not even the hero, that is to say, of his own tragedy;... But of course he is Hamletin one view of Shakespeare's character: a man rather of reflection than of action, on whom has been laid an intolerable burden (of revenge, by the way), and who suffers from sexual nausea (owing to his mother's incest) and deserts the woman he loves.

The resort to these four analogues from artistic and sacred history suggests a man-desperate, in his ordeal-ransacking the past for help in the present, and *not finding it* -finding only ironic parallels, or real examples, of his predicament. The available tradition, the poet seems to be saying, is of no use to us. It supplies only analogies and metaphors for our pain....

Prufrock's not proposing to the lady (there is no suggestion that anyone else will) might be thought of as aggressive: at whatever cost to himself, he deprives her of a mate, a normal married life. For such fear and humiliation as he suffers, we should expect some sort of revenge taken. But Prufrock suffers from the inhibitions that we might imagine as accompanying a man of such crucial indecision. He has difficulty in expressing himself, for instance, and this difficulty is brought prominently into the poem. Notice particularly the lines

And how should I begin?
It is impossible to say just what I mean'

His incoherence is a token of his struggle, and it is hardly surprising that his resentment against the woman in the poem emerges only in malicious detail ("catty" we would call this) as-of her arms

in the lamplight, downed with light brown hair!

What does come forward openly is his imagination of escape from the dilemma altogether.

Prufrock's burden is that of proposing marriage when he does not know whether or not he may be ridiculed. His desire, from the outset, to have the whole thing over with, no matter how, we have seen already in the line about the "patient etherised upon a table." At the very end of the poem, in an excited and brilliant passage which might be characterized as one of negative exaltation, he imagines-like Hamlet-his death, as an escape at any rate from the dread anxiety of his ordeal.. ..

Source: John Berryman, "Prufrock's Dilemma," in *The Freedom of the Poet, Farrar, Straus & Giroux,* 1940 pp. 270-276.

Adaptations

"The Caedmon Treasury of Modem Poets Reading Their Own Poetry." Audio cassette. Audiobooks, order #4322.

"More T.S. Eliot Reads." Audio cassette. Audiobooks, order #4388.

"Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats, by T.S. Eliot." Audio cassette. Audiobooks, Order #4393.

Topics for Further Study

Rewrite this poem as a short story, covering one night in the life of Prufrock. Where does he go? What does he see that makes him bring up the subjects that he does? In your story, who will you have Prufrock talking to?

Read Alfred, Lord Tennyson's poem "Ulysses," also included in *Poetry for Students.* What does Prufrock have in common with Ulysses? What similarity can you draw between the two poems' styles?

Do you think Prufrock has a good sense of who he is, or do you think he is deluded? Give evidence to support your answer.

Compare and Contrast

1915: The first long-distance telephone call from New York to San Francisco was made. Alexander Graham Bell repeated the words he spoke in 1868 over the first working model ("Mr. Watson, come here... ") to Thomas Watson in San Francisco. The call took 23 minutes to go through.

Today: International telephone calls, as well as cellular communications and public phones on airplanes, all are transmitted by having their signals bounced off of satellites orbiting the earth.

1916: The new Ku Klux Klan was organized, taking its name from a I 860s group and receiving an official charter from the state of Georgia. Throughout the following fifty years, the Klan was responsible for a reign of terror against nonwhites and non-Catholics, committing lynchings and fire bombings across the south with little interference from the law.

1957: The first Civil Rights Act to be passed by Congress since the l870s made it a federal crime to discriminate against people because of race.

Today: The Ku Klux Klan is still in operation, despite strong public opposition.

What Do I Read Next?

Eliot's works were collected in 1950 in *T.S. Eliot: The Complete Poems and Plays 19091950.* Since "Prufrock" was one of his earliest published works, readers can follow the poet's development: almost everything he wrote was noteworthy.

A good literary biography of Eliot is Ronald Bush's *T.S. Eliot: A Study in Character and Style,* published in 1983. The book portrays Eliot's artistic struggles with himself and ambition to always take art further than it had ever gone before.

A fascinating way to understand what was going on in the author's mind when he created this poem, and what he thought about it when it was done, is to read *The Letters of T.S. Eliot,* edited by Valerie Eliot, his widow, and published in 1988. Volume I covers 1898-1922, years when Eliot was an artistic revolutionary while working as a banker.

Further Study

Blythe, Hal, and Charlie Sweet. "Eliot's 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.'" *The Explicator* Volume 52, number 3, Spring 1994, p. 170.

It would have seemed that by the time this was written all that needed to be said about the poem would have been covered, but these authors bring to light new information about different interpretations and possible sources for the "ragged claws" line.

Bradbury, Malcom. *The Modern World: Ten Great Writers.* New York: Viking Penguin Inc., 1988.

Eliot is one of the great writers given his own chapter in this book, of course, but just as interesting is the introduction, which puts these ten writers (including Ibsen, Proust, Pirendello and Kafka) into perspective of one another like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle.

Symons, Julian. *Makers of the New: The Revolution in Literature* 1912-1939. New York: Random House, 1987.

The author is a well-known biographer and critic who knew several of the important artistic figures discussed in this book, and who therefore sketches out the rise of Modernism as an interesting, personal story.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Poetry for Students (PfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, PfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of PfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of PfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in PfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by PfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

PfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Poetry for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Poetry for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Poetry for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from PfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from PfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of PfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Poetry for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of PfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Poetry for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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